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Cut from Different Cloth

By selling their handwoven textiles, Patti Carpenter gives hope to the craftspeople who create them.

TO CELEBRATE THE MILLENNIUM NINE YEARS ago, Patti Carpenter headed to Brazil, where she threw flowers into the ocean and made a simple wish: I have a talent, and I would like to make it work in a different way. As a designer and fashion executive, Carpenter traveled the world in style but felt unsatisfied. “The ‘80s and ‘90s were a creative time on Seventh Avenue, but that changed,” she says. “Instead of meetings about an idea or an inspiration, the driving force was the bottom line.”

Returning home to New York City, Carpenter, now 54, volunteered with Aid to Artisans, a nonprofit group that promotes craft businesses in developing countries. “Twelve of us looked at products from these countries to see if the local people could make something better or different using the same skills.” Within a year, she had made the first of many trips to Africa and Central and South America, where she was so impressed with the handwoven and embroidered textiles that she quit her job to start Carpenter + Company. Now she imports beautiful throws, scarves, and table runners made by people in Guatemala and Bolivia, selling them through stores like Dean & Deluca and Bloomingdale’s. Many of the craftspeople use centuries-old techniques, taking undyed wool from alpacas and weaving it on hand-built foot looms. Carpenter’s efforts have helped the people she employs in unexpected ways. “I found out that some of the husbands of the women in Bolivia make costumes for Carnaval,” she says, “so I put them to work embroidering pillows. They often have to leave the family to look for work, but because the crafts subsidize their existence, the families can stay together. And now that they can afford to upgrade their pumps, we’ve seen cleaner water come into their communities.”

Today Carpenter travels the Third World, staying in hotels that may not even have hot water—but she likes it that way. “When I was feeling unfulfilled, a friend gave me a card that said: ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ The pay isn’t as good, but I get so much more.” (For information go to carpentercompany.biz; for details see Shop Guide.)

—Aimee Lee Ball